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Journal Title: The oil and gas journal.

Volume: 111 **Issue:** 7

Month/Year: July 1 2013

Pages: boa-eoa

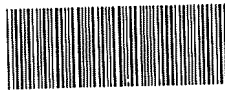
Article Title: The EPAs retreat

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The EPA's retreat

Retreat by the US Environmental Protection Agency from its hunt for hydraulic-fracturing witches exposes an overworked strategy of modern environmental politics. The strategy relies on the sophisticated propaganda machinery of activist groups to create the illusion of truth by repeating exaggerations. Thus, hydraulic fracturing, a completion technique used safely by oil and gas producers for decades, became a threat to drinking water only because environmentalists said it was. And EPA eagerly sought evidence to support the claim.

Whoops.

No smoking gun

Last year, the agency withdrew an allegation against Range Resources Corp. about contamination of drinking water near Fort Worth. It turns out gas in two suspect water wells came from zones much shallower than reservoirs fractured nearby. Also last year, EPA fanned activist alarm by investigating water supplies in Dimock, Pa., despite having concluded that hydraulic fracturing in the area posed no immediate threat. Again, the proverbial smoking gun proved elusive.

Now EPA has abandoned its late 2011 claim to have found, in drinking water around Pavillion, Wyo., "compounds likely to be associated with gas production practices, including hydraulic fracturing." That allegation came in a draft report released before findings had been subjected to outside review. Activists and obliging news media hailed it as proof the federal government needed to regulate a practice too controversial—because activists and news media said it was—to be left to states.

Yet again, EPA's findings haven't borne up to scrutiny. As the operator of old Pavillion gas field, EnCana Corp., has pointed out, natural gas detected in the two wells EPA drilled came from—surprise!—a gas reservoir more than twice as deep as drinking-water sources in the area. Several contaminants EPA discovered hadn't appeared in area water before and more likely came from testing flaws than from fracturing. And EPA's laboratory work for organic compounds produced inconsistent results that didn't support the agency's conclusions. A separate study by the US Geological Survey study also failed to substantiate EPA's findings.

So in a June 20 news release, EPA said it "stands behind its work and data" but doesn't plan "to finalize or seek peer review of its draft Pavillion groundwater report released in December 2011" or "rely upon the conclusions of the draft report." In other words, the agency stands behind its work and data except the hastily published and quickly discredited parts valuable only to environmentalist propaganda.

EPA also said it will support the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality and Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission in a continuation of the study of water-quality concerns around Pavillion. The state, it seems, can handle water issues related to hydraulic fracturing, better than EPA can. This inescapable interpretation of EPA's repentance confirms the industry's view that federal regulators should yield to state oversight of hydraulic fracturing. EPA said it will continue studying the activity anyway.

Hydraulic fracturing, properly conducted in wells properly cemented, doesn't threaten drinking water. Fear of the technique, promoted by activists wanting to block development of oil and gas supplies dependent on it, lacks foundation. And EPA too readily has made itself a tool of that obstructionism.

Automatic alliance

This isn't the only instance of activist exaggeration co-opting the Obama administration. The process has reached advanced stages in politics related to climate change. The mere possibility of catastrophic warming has evolved with diminishing substantiation into perceived probability. And the warming influence most attributable to human activity, carbon dioxide, has come to be treated as toxic, even though it occurs naturally in great abundance and is essential to life. Distortion has reached the point that the president, while announcing climate-change responses best seen as pandering to the fringe on June 25, provoked no laughter when he said he was addressing "carbon pollution."

Activists aren't always wrong when they try to scare people into changing behavior. Usually, they are—or mostly so. Habitual alliance with extremist exaggeration discredits EPA and the administration of which it's part. **OGJ**